

**Department of Human Services  
Office of Rehabilitation Services  
State Rehabilitation Council**

**Meeting Minutes May 12, 2009**

**9:00 A.M. – 11:30 A.M.**

**Crowne Plaza, 801 Greenwich Ave Warwick, RI 02886**

**Present from the Council: Janice Belasco, Dr. Kate McCarthy-Barnett, Rocco Bruno, Stephen Brunero, Linda Deschenes, Domenic DiOrio, Dr. Judith Drew, Jeanne Giroux, Margaret Hoyer, Anne LeClerc, Anna Liebenow, Sandy Lupovitz, Lucille Massemmino, Dr. Mona Dorsinville-Phanor, Lorna Ricci, Vincent Rossi, Catherine Sansonetti, Mary Wambach, Herb Weiss**

**Present from the VR Agency: Rebecca Dine-Nyeswa, Alicia DiMasi, Laurie DiOrio, Sharon DiPinto, Monica Dzialo, Kathleen Grygiel, Patricia Ianieri, Ronald Racine**

**Guest: Michael DeNezzo, Margarita S. Grome, Elisabeth Hubbard, Esq., Dan Pieroni**

**1. Call to Order - The Vice-Chair called the meeting to order at 9:00 A.M. Introductions of membership and guests followed.**

**2. Additions/Deletions to Agenda - There were none.**

**3. Approval of Minutes - The minutes were approved for the March 10, 2009 meeting.**

#### **Motion**

**J. Belasco made a motion seconded by L. Massemينو and unanimously approved to accept the minutes from the March 10, 2009 meeting.**

**4. The Office of Rehabilitation Services (ORS) Director's Report - S. Brunero started out the annual meeting by recognizing Margaret Hoyer and Domenic DiOrio for coming back to the SRC after difficult injuries and lengthy recoveries. They have both been such tireless advocates for people with disabilities. We are delighted and grateful to have them back to work.**

**The Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) - Had their annual meeting in Washington D.C. two weeks ago. The focus was on the American Recovery and Reinvestment Plan. R. Racine and myself attended. I was flying out on Sunday but had a call on Friday afternoon from the Director of DHS to tell me to cancel my plans to go to D.C. because I had to testify on Tuesday before the Senate Finance Committee's Subcommittee on Health and Human Services regarding the State's recent changes to its RI Works Program. Over the weekend I thought about the importance of being**

in D.C. to meet with our congressional delegation especially at this time, and I decided to adjust my flight plans to go to the conference. I got a flight that came back on Tuesday in time to testify, so I did go to the conference. At the conference we talked about the stimulus package in detail and R. Racine got the chance to meet with the congressional delegation from Rhode Island to promote services and programs for those with disabilities in our State.

As you may know, we are getting one point seven three (1.73) million dollars for Title One Vocational Rehabilitation programs in Rhode Island. There is no State match for the money; it is one hundred (100%) percent Federally funded dollars that we can directly infuse into our programs to provide opportunities. With money there is always a catch, I think some of you may have heard that there are some states that are not taking the money for political reasons. We will take the funding but with all the conditions that come with it like having to set up separate accounts, set up a specific plan that will be monitored much more closely than any plan we have ever had, it is going to be a lot of work for us particularly when we are down a number of staff. We have been working hard and have a sound plan set up to utilize the stimulus funds. I will get back to this after talking about the funding at the state level.

It looks like Rhode Island will have a four hundred and forty (440) million dollar projected budget deficit in 2009. Yesterday the Governor at the Revenue Caseload Conference biannual meeting

determined there is another one hundred and twenty nine (129) million dollars deficit on top of that. And he projected an over five hundred (500) million dollar deficient for 2010. Steven M. Costantino, the Chair of the House Finance Committee was quoted in the paper as saying, that the last thing they want to do at the State House was increase taxes, and potentially that human services and service for people with disabilities may continue to be cut. So it is an important time for us to continue to promote the advocacy efforts on the behalf of those we serve and to talk to our Legislators to maintain the integrity of our programs. At the Department of Human Services there is the RI Works Program going into effect. And it is estimated that three thousand (3000) people on public assistance are scheduled to lose their benefits come June 30, 2009. What kind of impact will this have on those that are at greatest need? It is important that the various commissions, councils, and the Disability Law Center that have all done a marvelous job to advocate for disabled Rhode Islanders, continue their efforts.

**Revenue Reductions** - This week state agencies received a directive from Gary Sasse, who is the Director of the Department of Administration, called Discretionary Spending/ Revenue Reductions. There has been a freeze on a lot of State services and programs and there are continued cutbacks such as buying paper and other office supplies. It is a symptom of the times when more and more services are being cut. The cutbacks are frustrating to us particularly because there are three (3) divisions at ORS, and one of them, Disability

**Determination, is one hundred percent (100%) Federally funded. They currently have a two thousand (2000) case backload of people who are applying for Social Security in Rhode Island. This backload is due primarily to staff shortages. The other two divisions at ORS, the Vocational Rehabilitation Program and the Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired are seventy-eight point seven (78.7%) percent Federally funded. The administration team at ORS has been strongly advocating for a waiver from budget restrictions. These are Federal dollars that fund the vocational rehabilitation programs, which are economic stimulus programs that help people go to work. We have done White Papers and met with the Director and the Governor's Staff and we are hopeful that we will continue to fill some of the vacancies.**

**American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) - We have a really nice plan that we have put out to increase vocational opportunities in Rhode Island for people with disabilities. There are a couple of catches with ARRA; they want short-term investments for long-term gains. For your information there is a new State agency, the Rhode Island Economic Recovery Reinvestment Team, which oversees the stimulus funds in Rhode Island. We have three (3) goals right now for utilizing stimulus money.**

**1. The first thing we have planned is a new case management system. Our current system started in 1992 and is archaic. It is going to be costly to replace but it will allow Counselors to work more efficiently in the field. It will be web-based and secure. It will probably be a one**

**(1) year project to train folks with this system.**

**2. The second thing we have planned is to staff our Agency in some creative ways. We will not be able to get full time State Workers so we will try to hire job coaches and job developers; people who can actually go out and meet with employers and help our consumers who are job ready get jobs. These will be temporary positions. We think it will translate to more people going to work.**

**3. Thirdly, is a program called SWEEP, a summer work experience and employment program. This program will provide opportunities for youth in transition with disabilities who have not had them in the past.**

**K. Grygiel, who drafted the SWEEP proposal, spoke briefly about this program. We do have some work experience programs that we do fee-for-service around the State but there are several issues, number one we do not have enough youth programs, and number two there are generally fee-for-service arrangements we work out with another agency. What we are hoping to do is provide a different focus with this program. We are really looking at having two agencies in a geographic region collaborating on buying some work experience program, we look at this as a pilot and then when the stimulus money runs out they will be self-sustaining. We are looking at the five (5) educational collaboratives across the State working in partnership with underserved populations. In addition we want to build into the**

program transportation and assessment and training components so students will have exposure to the transportation options in their area. There will be more to come as we develop this further, but we really want to approach this from a regional effort and have two (2) agencies collaborate so they are not duplicating or competing.

**S. Brunero** - These are three (3) primary targeted activities that we have to use some of those stimulus dollars and we want to keep you abreast of them as we move along. The key with the Federal government is tracking and seeing how well we do with these activities. These are very difficult economic times, and some people may even say what is happening with the economy is a catastrophe. I say never let a catastrophe go to waste. I think this is a nice opportunity for us to be visionaries, innovative and creative in how we do business and I have challenged our management team to become visionaries, to think outside the box. I am very excited about the work you folks have done throughout the year. I commend you all for taking time out of your busy schedules to come here this morning. I am excited about the coming year even though it is a difficult time fiscally, I think it is a time for change and I really look forward to working with you in this coming year.

## **5. Guest Speakers Transitioning and Leadership Skills for Youth**

**Dan Pieroni** has a Bachelor of Arts in Communication with Distinction in the Honors Program from Curry College, where he graduated in

**2007. He is currently working on his Masters at the University of Rhode Island. He is active with youth leadership, he serves on the Assistive Technology Committee, and he helps plan our youth leadership forums and will be MC for our first annual Dare to Dream conference. He wants a career position in the field of communications that allows creative expression.**

**Michael DeNezzo is graduating this week from CCRI and heading to Rhode Island College for his Bachelors in English in the fall. He is active in the Dare to Dream program and youth leadership.**

**The speakers were asked questions.**

**S. Brunero - Can you share your experiences transitioning to college and what resources you found helpful in this process?**

**Dan Pieroni - It has been awhile, six (6) years, since my transition time. It was a very important time in my life. I had a terrific resource program at my high school and I took a class that helped me so much, it taught me that if you have a documented disability when you are accepted at a college the best thing you can do is make that first appointment with a Disability Services Office. It is so important to have documentation if you encounter difficulty with a professor. I found transitioning very difficult because I had never been away from home and to come to another state was hard. It was hard to make new friends and just do the day-to-day things of life. But like everything in**



life, this time passed. By the time I reached my junior year I was invited to live in a suite style apartment and had my friends with me. I am still in touch with those friends. My advice for youth is that life is full of transitions and if you have supports to help you along the way you should take advantage of them.

**Michael DeNezzo** - High school is one thing, everything is laid out for you, but in college you have to develop your own schedule. You have to do things for yourself without anyone reminding you of them. An example of this was for transportation; I have to make my own arrangements with RIDE unlike the bus for high school that picked me up on schedule. Setting up all my classes on my own was a huge thing for me and it took effort. I would advise to get out there and research what is there for you, it is important to tell people your needs about your disability. If you take advantage of what is there it will help so much, it helped me a lot. Also it is important to use the facilities that the school has to offer to study, I do my work at school and it has helped me out to separate school from home time.

**S. Brunero** - If you could share one bit of advice with students going to college what would it be?

**Michael DeNezzo** - Time management is key! You have to figure out how to work out your schedule, you do what you have to do. You study, then take a break, and then do what is next on your schedule. Write it down and follow it. You can't let things slip by.

**Dan Pieroni - I echo the sentiments of Mike, time management is key. You really have to find the balance between the fun and work. It's important to remember that there are certain standards expected of you in that community. You have to maintain your grades and do your studies. Understand that while it may be fun and you will never get those days back, you are there to acquire skills for the real world.**

**M. Wambach - Where do you think you will be in ten years?**

**Michael DeNezzo - I can see myself at URI because I want to get my Masters in Library Science. My goal is to be working in a library.**

**Dan Pieroni - It is hard to say, I studied in broadcast communications with a concentration in radio. I want to work in radio and am trying to get a commercial deal. But with the economy so bad right now more people are losing their jobs in radio than getting. I am also considering teaching. I am currently unemployed even though ORS is helping me; I am still unemployed but that is the way it is right now there are more people losing jobs than gaining. I remain optimistic and hopefully in a few years you'll see my name in lights.**

**J. Drew – I'd like to ask about the supports you got in transition. One of the things I found with my students was if they needed alternative text for college they couldn't get them. And no one really worked with them at the college on their study skills.**

**Dan Pieroni - On a personal level it wasn't a problem for me. It was more of a problem at high school than college. At Curry, we have the Program for Advancement of Learning (PAL), which was one of the first programs for people who have learning disabilities. So it wasn't too hard at Curry for me; they embraced learning disabilities there.**

**Michael DeNezzo - If you find the supports they will help you. CCRI gives you extended time on test or lets you take them in a special location. I don't use large print books; sometime I use a CCTV that is a magnifier used to read text. But for the most part I did not need to get my text in alternative formatting.**

## **6. Guest Speakers New Counselors from the Office of Rehabilitation Services**

**S. Brunero - It is a tradition here with the SRC that we invite new Counselors to speak for us at this breakfast meeting. I remember back in 1993 speaking in front of the SRC with some of my colleagues. We are still down about eight (8) Counselors but we are hopeful to get the positions filled. But the folks we do have coming onboard are eminently qualified and talented. I want to introduce Alicia DiMasi, Patricia Ianieri, and Rebecca Dine-Nyeswa to you and ask them to informally speak about their experiences in getting into rehabilitation services. If you have any questions for them please ask at the end.**

**Patricia Ianieri - Region 2, Area 10, which two weeks ago I couldn't even tell you what that is but now I can. It is in Warwick in the Transition area. I just finished two (2) weeks of training so I am very new. Experience wise, I have taken a very long road around to get here. I have worked with adults with developmental disabilities and psychiatric mental health issues; I have opened my own business, worked for a human resource department, and now find myself relocated at the Office of Rehabilitation Services. I am very excited to work with a population in the transition programs that I have never worked with before. All of my experience has been with adults, so it has been very interesting to hear from the two young gentlemen here today. I look forward to working with students and reinventing, which is very cool.**

**Alicia DiMasi - I just finished the masters program at Salve Regina University in December and did my internship with ORS. I thought I wanted to work in clinical but once I finished my internship at ORS and fell in love with the VR Program and the people working there. What better place to work and have all the resources you need to help people. I was very fortunate to be hired in January. And am working in the Providence region responsible for covering general rehabilitation service referrals, benefits specialist, Providence College Liaison, Tides School and Tides Family Service.**

**Rebecca Dine-Nyeswa - I have my Masters from Salve Regina**

University and am receiving my Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies Programs on Sunday in Mental Health Counseling. I believe in H.O.P.E. that is helping other people to exist. I have done a lot of advocacy work. I have worked for six (6) years in mental health care in the community to help people to exist. I have learned that in order to help people to exist you have to give them the power to be able to have a role in society. I work in the Providence region and I am excited because the caseload I have is with homeless, whom I have always worked with, and people who have substance abuse issues, and this is my passion.

S. Brunero - They are all very modest about their accomplishments. They all have very unique and talented backgrounds. And although we recruited these people to come to ORS it was not always certain they would come here. Patricia Ianieri was a successful marketing director and we always talk about making a difference in someone's life here at ORS, and I think that may have swayed her to leave that position she had to come and help those less fortunate than ourselves. I was at the national conference of rehabilitation services administrators last year and the Connecticut State Director informed me that Alicia DiMasi was a candidate to go to work for them. My staff worked tirelessly behind the scenes to steal her away for Rhode Island. And Rebecca Dine-Nyeswa has a very unique background and we pride ourselves on being diverse and addressing all the needs of all Rhode Islanders. You don't hear the things she is talking about, homelessness and substance abuse, that often and I think it is

**a growing need here in Rhode Island. So having the talents that these women have is something I am very proud of.**

**7. Subcommittees - See attached document (SRC Committee Strategic Update Spring 2009)**

## **8. Notes of Interest**

**Tomorrow is a disability awareness day in Newport that ORS is partnering. It is at Easton's Beach. There will be wheelchair tours and silent tours. Newport is a challenging community to navigate for the disabled person.**

**June 3rd at Save the Bay, ORS. Roads to Independence, and Social Security Administration are going to develop a partnership on Ticket to Work; we have the Federal Government coming to speak at that.**

**June 19th at the Radisson Hotel there is going to be an Asset Development Conference partnership primarily sponsored by the RI Developmental Disabilities Network.**

**9. Public Comment - Margarita S. Grome complimented the Council for an interesting meeting and thanked them for having her as a guest.**

**10. Adjournment - The meeting was adjourned at 11:30 A.M.**

**Respectfully Submitted,**  
**Nancy L. Baker, Staff**  
**State Rehabilitation Council**